Clear-Cut Living Pages

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enthusiastically. Presently, in high jinks of unrestraint, the fire splattered tiny embers that flew about like escapading leaves in a windstorm.

From the center of the fire a scrawny stick reared above its companions. A wee flame darted upward from the end, then retreated. No harm following its adventurous leap, the diminutive blaze took courage. It stretched higher and higher—an ambitious thing, oddly humanlike in its efforts.

"Uncle Hi" directed a stream of tobacco juice toward the blaze. By an uncomfortable fraction of an inch it missed the slender flame, which jumped back in apparent alarm, and winked out.

"Hit'll come back in a minute er two," he said, pointing with his right forefinger toward the end of the stick, "that 'ar leetle ol' blaze, hit will.

"Hit's a game down hyar, hit is," he remarked after he wiped his lips with the back of his hand, "fer t' set an' spit at them 'ar leetle ol' blazes, hit is. Th' wimmen, they like fer t' do hit better'n th' men. Hit gives 'em somethin' t' do.

"An' hit seems's ef them 'ar leetle ol' blazes, they like t' play hide an' seek with t'backer juice," he went on. "They'll jump in an' out, an' dare sumbudy t' ketch 'em, an' they'll keep hit up 'til th' whole end 'v th' stick, hit's afire."

A little girl in the far interior of "the Tennessee lands."

For a time conversation lagged. These lapses in talk give you plenty of time to reflect on the emptiness of the lives of Mark Twain's living characters from the opening chapter of "The Gilded Age." Imagine, if you can, being unable to read—for the most of them are illiterate; and having nothing to read but a catalog if you do know the alphabet. No town; no streets; no picture shows about you—just the wilderness. No amusement, except spitting at "leetle blazes." And nothing much to talk about, because you've been talked out of something to say for more years than you can remember.

Supper was eaten by daylight to save coal oil. The lamp never is lighted, except in emergencies. And the meal varied little from the majority of meals you get in these sheltered spots. There was corn bread—heavy slabs of it; what is known as "bacon" in the uplands—fat chunks of salt pork, fried in its own grease until that grease floated them in the bowl from which you picked your particular chunk; potatoes boiled; beans, and coffee that had the taste and the aroma of ammonia. In these sheltered spots, Mark Twain's people certainly never have learned to eat.

"That 'ar ol' baby 'v Goodle Sellers," remarked "Uncle Hi" some minutes after the meal was over, and perhaps ten of us were seated before the fire, "that 'ar ol' bratze 'v his'n, hit's got th' canker sore mouth."

"Shoe water's whut hit needs," replied his wife. "Hit's th' only thing which hit'll cure tham 'ar ol' cankers."

"When th' bratze's pappy, he comes in at night," explained "Uncle Hi" in response to an unasked question, "ef he'll jes' take his ol' shoes, which he's bin a-wearin', an' fill 'em with water at th' spring, an' let that 'ar ol' water soak in 'em, an' then empty hit out, an' wash that 'ar ol' bratze's mouth out with hit, why, that 'ar ol' shoe water, hit'll shore nuf cure them 'ar ol' cankers right up."

That moment a bevy of "leetle blazes" upreared in the fireplace. "Uncle Hi," his wife, and some of their older descendants, took up their spitting game.

Suddenly through the open door came skunk odor that was nearer to a vapor.

"Dill Mason's ketched a skunk fer hi'se'f fer th' chicken pox," remarked "Uncle Hi," without turning his head. The little blazes were playing a boisterous game, and there was no time to devote to anything else.

"Thar's a lot 'v that 'ar ol' chicken pox 'round hyar now," he later remarked at the end of the game, which resulted in a score of ten to one in favor of the blazes, "an' that 'ar ol' skunk smell, hit'll clear hit out, hit will. Thar won't be no chicken pox hyar in a day er two.

"Dill's bratzes, they hain't got hit yit, an' they won't git hit now," he went on, "fer he'll hang that 'ar ol' daid skunk over th' door. Hit'll keep away typhoid fever, er smallpox, er any 'v them 'ar ol' diseases, hit will.

"Yes, sir," continued "Uncle Hi" in a slow drawl, "that 'ar ol' skunk, hit will shet up any epidemic 'v any kin', ef y' put hit above th' door on th' outside. Fer them 'ar ol' diseases, they're jes' like a-hangin' a buzzard's tail feathers over th' door.

"Y' know, ef y' nail one 'v them 'ar ol' buzzard's tail feathers over th' door," and here "Uncle Hi's" voice lowered to a croakish whisper, and he peered through the door to see what lay beyond, "thar hain't no witch whut ever flew er walked, which hit'll go in under hit, thar hain't."

The silence that followed was broken by a solitary owl call. It echoed among the crags about the cabin. "Uncle Hi" heard it, and listened attentively. The cry was repeated.

"I'll jes' shet that 'ar ol' door," he said, and he hastily made good his intention.

Then, as if to change the subject, he quavered a song. It was an interminable thing, that detailed the unsuccessful efforts of a mountain somebody to draw milk from a brier bush. The words evidently originated from one of a dozen mountain versions of the Biblical story of the stone that was offered in the place of bread.

The owl call was the cause of the music. In these last of the living pages from the writings of Mark Twain, cries of night birds are heard as an evil omen. The belief is that they are prowling witches in disguise. When he heard it, "Uncle Hi" sang to keep up his spirits, like a small boy whistles when he passes a graveyard after dark.

For these people live always in horror of a visitation not only from witches, but also from "hants," a corruption of the word "haunts." They are malicious spirits of the dead, prowling around to bedevil the living in a hundred different ways. And the "hants" are a touchy clan. They resent loose talk about themselves, with strangers especially, and they take fearful vengeance by chasing night travelers for long distances. The "hants" gather in bevies, these mountaineers will tell you, and screaming and cawing like crows, they will, unseen but heard, corner individuals in lonely places. There in the midst of an unearthly hubbub they will beat these individuals until the life is nearly out of them. At other times they merely pursue those who have offended them—but the pursuit is nearly as trying as the beating, for it is a hard job to run for any distance up the sides of peaks, and down the other sides into depressions. While the pursuit is on, the "hants" utter their fearful cries. For these reasons, you'll seldom hear many tales about "hants," until you are well acquainted with Mark Twain's people in these sheltered spots.

And the worst of the prevalence of "hants" is that their numbers constantly increase. The rocky soil prevents the digging of deep graves. The coffins are flimsy affairs. Sometimes they are so scantily covered that their outlines are plain to be seen. They crack open soon after burial, "t' let th' hants out," the old women say, but between excursions over the mountains the "hants" can be found at home in their graves.

Partly as a protection against droves of wild hogs, who dig up freshly dead bodies, and partly as a mark of respect, newly made graves are surrounded with brush, and even with pretentious fences; and they are covered with structures of various kinds. Old Mark Twain highlanders say that these fences and structures provide "hant" shelters long after the coffins fall apart, and the graves are nothing but earth scratches. When the mood for making talk is on them, these old-timers of the uplands will spin long yarns that are filled with details concerning adventures with flocks of "hants," and especially about the whirring sound that they make, caused by their flights when some invader disturbs a shelter where they have congregated to plot mischief and devilment against the living.

But of witches you'll hear aplenty. They're not numerous. But belief in their powers is widespread. When afflictions of the most ordinary kind come upon families they are regarded as weird evils, rather than as natural consequences. Then the witch doctor is summoned to remove the spell, and he goes about his business in the most astounding ways. There are several witch doctors on "the Tennessee lands," and they are kept reasonably busy relieving distress.

Of all of these "hant" and witch afflictions that you're likely to hear, however, there are few that are not endenizened bits of fairy lore and monster stories, changed a bit, but showing that they are parts of Old World superstitions brought into the hill country by the early settlers. These tales have been wound one with another, and made to fit "Tennessee lands" localities, until it is not always easy to trace each story back to the nation from which it was brought into the hills.

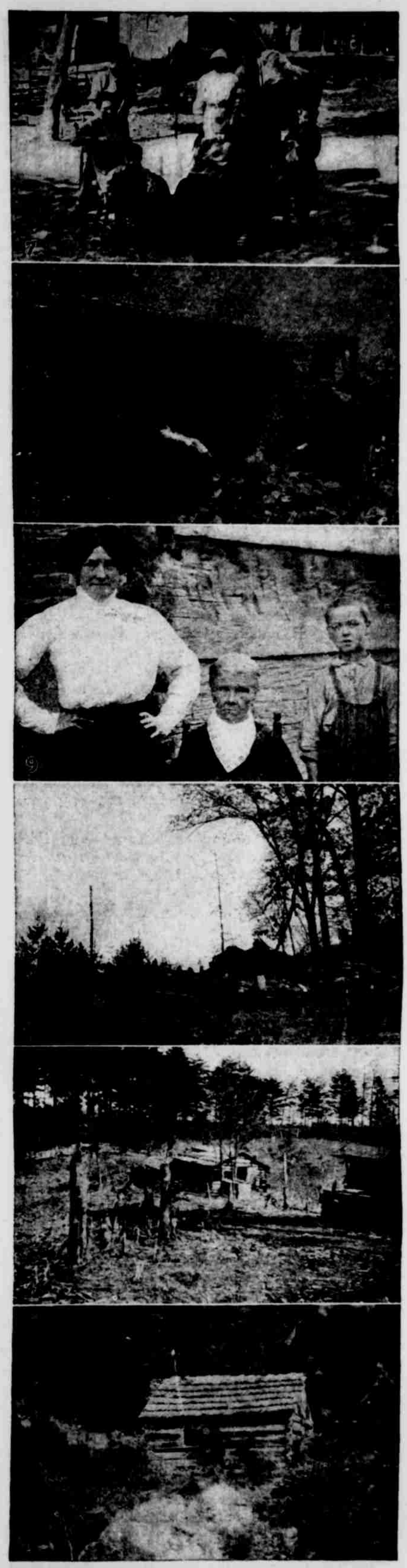
It lacked a few minutes of half past six when "Uncle Hi" suggested his need for sleep. Bedtime comes early in these sheltered spots. He indicated to me the bed in the far corner of the room. That was the guest chamber, and the partition between it and the family bedroom was the heaped-up pile of sweet potatoes.

Soon eight persons, "Uncle Hi," his wife, and six he and she descendants of various ages, removed their shoes. The men unbuttoned their shirts at the collars; the women loosened their dresses at the tops, and without further preparation, one by one they crawled into the bed opposite my own. On that bed, as well as on the one I occupied, there was a tick fat with feathers to sleep on, and a duplicate of it to sleep under. The remainder of the family distributed themselves in the other room, which also was the dining room, and all was quiet.

And that is their life. Is it general on "the Tennessee lands"? No. It is modified to all of the degrees between this life and near-obliteration of Mark Twain realism over the country of the opening chapter of "The Gilded Age." These people are the exceptions, but they are exactly the kind of people who might have been Mark Twain's playmates, and later neighbors.

For "The Gilded Age" is but a history of the Clemens family. His father and mother owned these lands, and lived upon them, until the urge for moving took them into Missouri shortly before Mark Twain was born. Had the migration been delayed for a reasonable length of time, or not undertaken, Mark Twain would have been born into an environment and among a people precisely of the sort he pen-pictured. He wrote "The Gilded Age" largely from the stories of "the Tennessee lands" that his mother told him. She was honest in giving him her impressions, though they must have been a mosaic of disappointment to her. Years afterward he saw that country. Leaving it, and coming north on the railroad, he sat in the smoking car with one cigar alight between his lips, and another cigar in his hand.

"I'm contemplating this cigar," he said to his seatmate, "with a lot of satisfaction, and thinking how good it will taste when I light it."



7. A gossiping group in the highway through the country of "The Gilded Age."
8. You can camp on "the Tennessee lands."
9. All dressed up for visitors to "the Tennessee lands."
10. A "hant" shelter on "the Tennessee lands." Graves are covered with structures or surrounded with fences to prevent disturbance by wild hogs.
11. Single cabin and animal shelter where Mark Twain realism is nursed.
12. Where Mark Twain realism is vivid on "the Tennessee lands."